Universal Audio 4-710d | £2,039

UA package up four of their 710 Twin-Finity pres, add 1176-style compressors and top it off with eight channels of A/D. ***Robbie Stamp*** checks out the buzz

ON THE DVD

WHAT IS IT?

Four-channel solid-state/valve blending preamp with compression and eight-channel A/D

CONTACT

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HIGHLIGHTS

1 A great tool for harmonic manipulation
2 Simple and effective compressors
3 Full sounding preamps with plenty of clean gain

The 4-710d is UA's their first product in decades to offer more than two channels. The centre piece is four preamp channels utilising the 710 Twin-Finity architecture which blends solid-state and valve (tube) amplification stages.

Each preamp houses a simple compressor, the design of which is based on UA's famous 1176. An A/D section allows for ADAT and AES/EBU output of these four channels as well as four additional fixed gain line inputs at all standard rates up to 192kHz.

Trial by fire

I received the review unit just before a recording session I was booked for outside my own studio, and being too lazy to pull any of my other preamps out of the rack I decided to give the 4-710d a trial by fire hoping it would deliver on the day. The number of switches and the small font size made navigation a little tricky to start with in the slightly dingy room I was recording in, but after a few times wondering why lifting the gain of one channel seemed to have no effect (it was the output of the previous channel) I soon got comfy. Simply put the 4-710d is a great front-end for recording and despite my initial navigational confusion it is also very easy to use. The VU meters provide enough feedback about what's going on with the four preamp channels: input drive, output level and gain reduction. The status of all eight output channels at the point of A/D conversion is covered by eight two segment LEDs that let you know the difference between a healthy signal and a clipped one.

When you start tinkering with the exciting regions of harmonic distortion that this unit opens up the VU meters can get pegged pretty easily when monitoring input and output levels, at which point they are not only useless but also in danger of being damaged. Luckily the gain reduction (GR) mode cannot act so violently so this mode can be used just to spare the coils as well as check how much action the compressor is involved in.

Preamps

The recording session I subjected the 4-710d to was focussed on creating oddball percussion/rhythm tracks. This involved many changes of mic and settings as layers were added. Dynamic, condenser and ribbon mics were all used to capture loud and quiet sources both close up and from

A/D output and limiting

A/D conversion is fitted as standard in the 4-710d (thus the 'd'). The eight channels, which are the four preamps and the four fixed-gain line inputs, are available via optical ADAT and AES/EBU, the latter utilising the DB-25 connector in TDIF configuration. There are two ADAT sockets so that all eight channels can be transmitted at 88.2kHz and 96kHz using the SMUX protocol, and just the four preamp channels at 176.4kHz and 192kHz. The clocking options are simple: the unit can act as master with sample rates selectable via a front panel knob or as slave via Wordclock. The A/D quality is of a suitably high quality and would take a much more costly converter to make any significant improvement.

UA have also included a limiter that engages for all channels via a front panel switch. This is mostly transparent and keeps unruly transients in check, and can even add its own brand of THD if pushed hard enough.

a distance, and no part of the frequency spectrum went unrepresented. At every turn the 4-710d (oh for a more snappy name!) provided an excellent mix of clarity and transient accuracy without running out of gain or headroom. Much of the time the difference between the solid-state (TRANS) and valve (TUBE) topologies was very subtle, but as I became more confident with the flexibility of the preamps began to explore the non-linear ranges (i.e. distortion) for a more coloured result, and it is here that the TRANS/TUBE blend knob comes up trumps. As one would imagine the solid-state side is much harsher when overdriven, and though it adds some bite to transient sources (e.g. drums) it can quickly trash sustained sounds. The valve side is softer and more pleasing when overdriven on sustained sounds as the harmonic distortion tapers off quicker up the frequency range.

The distortion characteristics of the 4-710d with synth basses/leads and drums is a real joy and these elements can be made to leap out of the speakers without destroying their power and tone. The more subtle distortions are great for enriching a whole host of sources (vocals, guitars, electric pianos, horns, etc) without losing mid frequency definition or putting the low mids in a fuzzy box.

The DI inputs, which use a JFET amplification stage, sound great and manage to deliver a full can clean signal on guitars and basses with a pleasing low-mid response that often gets lost with overly bright and crisp DIs that seem to populate many interfaces and preamps.

The harmonic distortion possibilities make short work of adding bite and sustain to instruments before feeding into an amp sim.

> The harmonic distortion possibilities make short work of adding bite and sustain

Compressing

The compressor section is a simple affair with a single switch but this is enough to do a great job. The switch engages the compressor in either fast or slow response modes, both at a 4:1 ratio. I am a fan of simple dynamics processors as they mean less creative time is spent fiddling – it either works or it doesn't. In this case it certainly does. In either mode (fast or slow) when the VU meter needle is just being tickled the compression is relatively transparent and easily allows for a non-destructive thickening of the source. As an overt effect they can get pretty rude, especially in combination with some overdrive (again, synth basses and leads really benefit), and yield results that outclass so many characterless standalone compressors. The two speed switches are enough so that I didn't find myself wishing for an inbetweener – if I didn't like what it was doing I switched it out. Though the compressors can really help define a source in the tracking stage they also add to the unit's quality as a post-recording treatment source.

Total package

As the robustly utilitarian name suggests this is four 710 Twin-Finity units in a 2U-rack case and, with the four compressors and A/D capabilities taken into account, makes for an excellent deal. This presents the analogue signal path quality that UA are synonymous with in a recording front end package that is surprisingly flexible. It's not only a tracking tool, but will also find much use in mixing and production due to the distortion and compression facilities. The A/D section and analogue routing make sure that it can easily integrate into your setup without requiring additional investment. This is a unit you'd be hard pressed to turn off for long. FM

FutureMusic VERDICT

BUILD
VALUE
EASE OF USE
VERSATILITY
RESULTS

A complete front-end package that delivers flexible high fidelity with creative tone shaping.

SPECS

Rear Analogue I/O: 4x XLR (mic inputs), 4x XLR (line inputs ch 1-4), 8x ¼" TRS (insert sends and returns ch 1-4), 4x ¼" TRS (line inputs ch 5-8)

Front Analogue I/O: 4x ¼" TRS (Hi-Z inputs ch 1-4)

Rear Digital I/O: 2x optical TOSLINK (ADAT out ch 1-8), 2x BNC 75 (Wordclock In/Out), 1x DB-25 (AES/EBU ch 1-8)

Max. Input Level: 6.7dBu (mic), 26dBu (bal. line),

Max. Output Level: 20dBu (bal./unbal.)

Max Gain: 70dB (mic), 49dB (line)

Frequency Response: +0.1/-0.15dB (20Hz to 20kHz)

Crosstalk: < -115dB (max. gain @ 1kHz)

S/N Ratio: 109dB (100% Tube), 110dB (100% solid-state)

Compressor: 0.3ms/2.0ms attack (fast/slow), 100ms/1.1s release (fast/slow), 4:1 ratio

Limiter: 0.075ms attack, 100ms release

Low Cut Filter: 75Hz, second order Bessel type

Tube/Valves: 2x 12AX7 (i.e. 1 side of dual triode per channel for ch.1-4)

Digital Output: 44.1kHz to 192kHz @ 24-bit or 16-bit dithered, clock master or slave via Wordclock

Dimensions:
89 x 482 x 305mm

Weight:
5.2kg

ALTERNATIVES

Focusrite ISA428 MkII

£1,440

The transformer-based ISA pre is well renowned for quality, and this unit's got four of 'em.

focusrite.com

SSL XLogic Alpha VHD Pre

£999

Four quality pres with the VHD harmonic distortion from the Duality desks.

solid-state-logic.com

RME OctaMic II

£1,232

The price difference could go towards dynamics processors.

rme-audio.com